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ABSTRACT

The PEACESAT (Pan Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite) project has the mechanism for the facilitation of communication with the Pacific islands and is based on a good understanding of the island systems that comprise the participants in the news exchange experiment. What has been lacking in the experiment is a systematic study of the journalist-participants, the values they hold toward the news, and the content areas they feel would have the highest reader or listener interest. Through a three-level paradigm, supplemented by a content analysis of past exchanges (and planned analyses of future exchanges), the PEACESAT news exchange experiment working group hopes to answer the questions of value, content, and interest as a basis for designing innovations to the basic exchange format. A primary means of investigating these questions will be a series of roundtable dialogues via PEACESAT among Pacific island journalists. It is hoped that participation in these dialogues will also encourage increased participation by the journalists in the basic news exchanges. (Author/TJ)

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Designing Innovations for News Exchanges Among Pacific Island Journalists Via the PEACESAT Experiment

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Designing Innovations for News Exchanges Among Pacific Island Journalists Via the PEACESAT Experiment

On any Wednesday (or Tuesday, depending on which side of the International Dateline one is on), journalists from 15 Pacific localities stretching over 64 million square miles of ocean from Rarotonga to Papua New Guinea have the opportunity to exchange news items from their respective island regions via satellite.

Such a live, interactive forum would seem to be a near-ideal solution to bridge the communication gulf that isolation, vast distances and infrequent transportation have formed among island groups.

Surely a journalist-controlled co-operative satellite interchange should greatly reduce the type of lament expressed by an American Samoan that in order for him to learn about a hurricane in "neighboring" Fiji, the news would have to travel from Fiji to Australia, to Hong Kong, to London, to New York, to San Francisco, to Honolulu and finally to American Samoa via UPI wire service.[1]

But the ideals of a free flow and exchange of news have been tempered by the realities of varying political-cultural systems participating in the project and the hard-nosed journalistic guidelines of usability and interest.

Instead of the Fijian journalist speaking directly to, and answering questions from the American Samoan journalist, all too often a satellite terminal manager reads newspaper

items to other, uninterested terminal managers, or plays a tape recording of items left by a journalist, providing no opportunity for feedback from other participants.

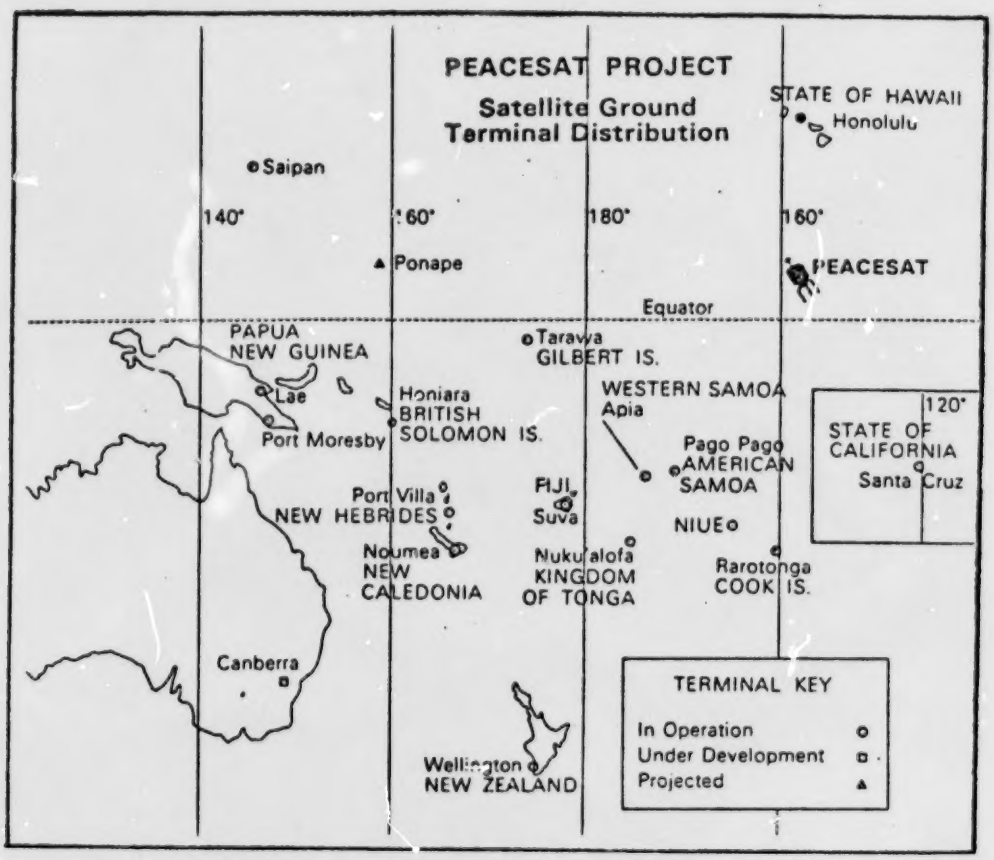
While the satellite hardware provides a viable medium for Pacific journalists to expand their news coverage of other islands, the software and low level of participation by the journalists themselves leaves the ideal unfulfilled.

A Call for Strategies

To review the progress and problems of this regional news exchange experiment, Dr. John Bystrom, director of the Pan Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite (PEACESAT)prcject, through which the exchanges are conducted, formed a working group of representative scholars from the University of Hawaii departments of journalism and communication, the East-West Center Communication Institute and the Hawaii PEACESAT terminal management.

The group's goals were to develop strategies for the study of the regional news exchange experiment and for innovations designed to increase participation in it.

This paper will attempt to provide a background for the PEACESAT regional news exchange experiment and discuss the innovative strategies planned to involve Pacific island journalists in higher-level exchanges that could have a potential spill-over effect to expand the participation in the regular weekly news item exchanges.



The PEACESAT project was founded in 1969 by Bystrom through the obtaining from NASA of the deactivated but still functional ATS1 weather satellite. The satellite sits in a stationary orbit south of Hawaii, above the Easter Islands and has a coverage area which includes the entire Pacific Basin from the mid-Australian continent to the U.S. mainland.

Bystrom's goal was to demonstrate the feasibility of low-cost ground terminals linked to a satellite dedicated to co-operative community and social development as an alternative to the usual pattern of social uses having to adapt to the higher cost networks (such as INTELSAT) developed primarily for industrial and military requirements and controlled by

high technology nations.[2]

Communication on PEACESAT is mostly two-way voice, with capabilities for teletype, facsimile, medical sensory devices and slow-scan television.

Early uses of PEACESAT included co-operative education programs and public health information exchanges.

In 1972 the Communication Institute of the East West Center in Hawaii became involved with PEACESAT through a forum on journalism education which discovered that two main models operate in the Pacific: the British apprenticeship "sink or swim" system and the American academic study/practical course approach.[3]

A second journalistic use of PEACESAT came the following year with the Press Conference of the Pacific, again organized to a great degree by the East West Center's Communication Institute. Two such conferences were held in 1973, one on tourism in the Pacific originating from Hawaii and the other on Pacific trade originating from Wellington, New Zealand.[4]

Although the predictable problems of coordinating timing across five time zones and the International Dateline, and some technical interference surfaced, the conferences were considered a success.[5]

The news conference method of exchange, however, has not since been repeated.

In 1974 the South Pacific Commission, a consortium of Pacific Island nations, began a regional news exchange among its members with PEACESAT terminals as an experiment sponsored

by its Radio Bureau.

Bureau Director Ian Johnstone, in a memo from the Commission's Fiji headquarters to participating members stated:[6]

> The paucity of regional news is one of the major programme deficiencies identified by many of those concerned with educational and general broadcasting in the Commission's area. While efforts are moving ahead to improve the quality of communication channels in the region, it will be some time before Pacific communities have the ready access to news and information about developments in their neighboring countries which is essential to minority and mass education.

Johnstone's rationale has continued to be the major underpinning for the news exchange program.

Johnstone envisioned the original exchange as a three month experiment. During that time a few exchanges were scheduled as well as some news bulletins from a South Pacific Forum meeting. Problems were noted such as poor writing styles, the difficulty of transcribing the news items, the unfamiliarity with name spellings and pronounciations from different island languages and sundry technical problems. After the initial experimental period a common format was adopted to attempt to alleviate some of these receiving problems.[7]

The format sounds very much like the Voice of America's "News in Special English" model:

Each terminal reader begins with a "headline summary" of all items. The items are then given in order - each with its own "title" to identify it within the headline order. At the end of each item correct spellings are given for proper names.

Some island media transcribe the items for publishing in a newspaper, some rewrite them for broadcast either in English or in a vernacular, and some have rebroadcast the exchange in part or totally on regular broadcast frequencies.

The experiment was extended and participation grew among the original islands with PEACESAT terminals and expanded with the addition of new terminals on other islands.

The basic format remained unchanged and items exchanged with the greatest frequency included news about domestic politics and government; foreign and international relations; and economic, business and labor conditions.[8]

Although the number of participants increased throughout the exchange experiment, the number of actual journalists participating has decreased.

Tempering Influences

Criticism of the news exchange experiment has centered mainly on the usefullnes of items exchanged[9] and the frequency of bulletins lasting too long to allow for question-and-answer periods or futher interchange.[10]

As participation by journalists in the exchanges has decreased, exchanges have been conducted by terminal managers who read items from the weekly newspaper but have no basis to comment on them. In some cases the news items are taped in advance by a journalist and dropped off at the terminal station for replay during the exchange, thus preventing any possible direct feedback.[11]

Participating in the news exchange experiment has been

affected by political concerns as well. Fiji, a key member of the South Pacific Commission, at first was a leader in the exchange experiment, but then dropped out when there was a question whether the PEACESAT experiment might be in unfair competition with commercial carriers and services. Fiji rejoined the exchange only to drop out again recently when a dispute emerged between the Fiji Post and Telegraph agency and the University of the South Pacific on licensing and restrictions of PEACESAT usage.[12]

Indeed the uses of PEACESAT, or at least the language of its use, must be carefully controlled. The terminal licenses are for "experimental" services. In much of the PEACESAT literature the word "experiment" rather than "service" is used, as is "exchange" rather than "network."

Programs such as the regional news exchange must be presented as organic uses, emanating from the users themselves, and not a news service originating from and controlled by a major nation (such as the U.S. or New Zealand) and networking the smaller nations.

Worry over such dominance over and supplanting of extant telecommunication channels prompted the designation of the 1973 Pacific Press Conferences as "editors' seminars."[13]

The current working group also faces similar semantic delicacies in order to, among other things, include Fiji as a participant in higher-level journalistic exchanges without drawing their connection to the basic level regional news exchange experiment, in which it cannot participate.

The Honolulu-based group must also avoid the appearance of dominance over the other, unevenly developed islands. There is often an automatic resistance to programs or projects among Pacific islanders when they perceive any part of the program as an imposition of "First World Ways" on developing nations.

But the avoidance of dominance, and the development of an organic, "Pacific Way" is consistent with the purpose of PEACESAT since its inception: to develop a workable user-based inter-communication system through total participation in planning, development and implementation of programming.

The most successful programs are those which yield the widest participation appeal. It is logical that programs which include widespread participation in development will yield widespread participation in usage.

The Current Study

In December 1978 the working group first met to review the current status of the regional news exchange experiment. Bystrom pointed out three main areas of study potential:

--the operation of the regional news exchange experiment;
--studies of news flow and the impact of the experiment;
--innovations - new experiments to expand participation by journalists.

In reviewing the operation and status of the news exchange, it is helpful to review the goals of the original experimentation period as set forth by Johnstone:[14]

--identify present and probably future patterns of need for news and information exchange in the region;

--provide data on the capabilities of various communication media, and the ways in which they may complement each other;

--provide training opportunities for media personnel.

The history of the news exchange experiment indicates a desire, if not a need, for news and information exchange.

The Pacific Islands News Association, formed in 1974 by newspaper editors and broadcast news directors in the Pacific, listed "a need for a regular system of supplying news of what was happening elsewhere in the Pacific" as a priority project.[15]

There has been no data collected on whether island-participants are using the news exchange experiment as a training ground (goal #3) for technical aspects of communication. There is no indication that the experiment has been used for journalism training, although the potential is certainly there.

It is Johnstone's second goal which should serve as a major measuring stick in evaluating the impact of the news exchange and in designing new applications or formats to the basic experiment.

Documented usage of news exchange items has been sporadic. According to one study,[16] the Cook Islands have made the most use of the exchanges: The Cook Island News publishes a regular column of news exchange items and the Cook Islands Educational Department reproduces the items on mimeograph as a part of a current events curriculum.

Some island radio stations rebroadcast a tape of selected exchange items while other rewrite them, sometimes translating them into a vernacular.

Such impact has been slow and difficult to measure. Predicating against any large impact is the interest factor, in large part shaped by the traditional patterns of news flow from the major nations such as New Zealand, France and the U.S. to their former colonies such as Fiji, Tahiti and American Samoa.[17] In many instances one Pacific island must "learn" to become interested in another. Despite the common geographic and often economic factors, identification among Pacific islands is largely with a major power that once controlled them rather than with each other.

Johnstone's goal of "complementing media," while seen to some degree in the Cook Islands, has yet to appear with any force. The obtaining of new via radio for newspaper journalists is, on its face, an uncomplementary concept.

The usual concept of radio as being primarily a unidirectional medium with delayed, at best, feedback might be a prompting factor for some journalists to tape record their exchange presentation and drop it off for the terminal manager to play during the appointed time. The interactive potential of the satellite exchange is a dimension that takes getting used to.

The format of the exchanges itself, while having the advantage of commonality, might be a detracting factor to the news exchange process because of its implied rigidity

and discouragement of interchange.

And underlying all of the need/desire, format/facility considerations in reviewing the news exchange experiment for the purpose of designing strategies for its expansion is the question of shared news values and interest in news content among the participants.

While the focus of development of the news exchange experiment has been on designing a workable format, there has been no investigation into the variances of the basic question "What is news?" among the Pacific island journalist-participants.

Although the exchange program itself has continued on a fairly even keel, the participation in it by journalists has declined, leading to speculation that the island editors and news directors feel there is little of "news value" in the exchanges.

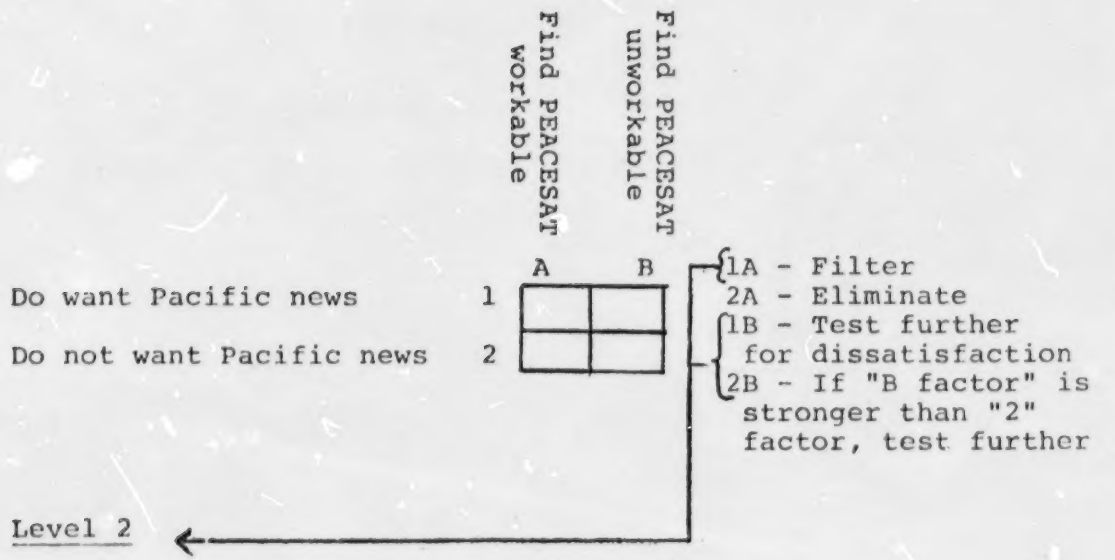
A Paradigm for Focus

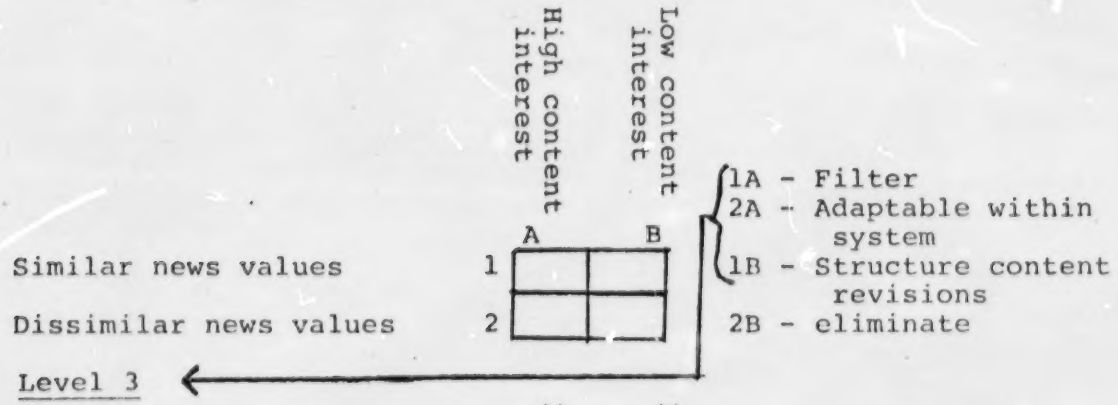
A paradigm for investigating the problem of participation by journalists in the news exchange program was presented to the group as a focal point of the study.

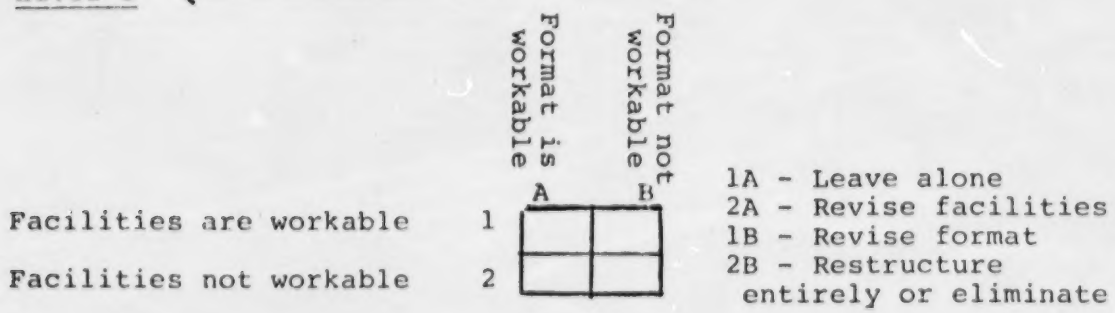
The paradigm works at three levels. The first raises the basic question of whether participants want regional news and whether they find the PEACESAT exchange system a workable medium and system of obtaining that news (over other systems such as newspaper exchanges or conventional wire services).

A PEACESAT PARADIGM

Level 1







For participants that fall into the "1A" paradigm block of the first level, there is no problem at this particular point although dissatisfaction might emerge at later levels. Those in "1B" are obviously dissatisfied with the current news exchange system via PEACESAT, and ideally that dissatisfaction will show up for analysis at one of the remaining levels of the paradigm.

Those participants in the "2B" block should not be immediately written off. The possibility exists that they do want regional news because of dissatisfaction with the system itself. The medium, in this case, could be the message - and a very negative one at that.

On the second level the question of value vs content is explored. After filtering to the next level those who fall into the "1A" block at this level, participants can be studied for combinations of similar value systems but low interest in content (which might be remedied by format expansion at level 3) and those of dissimilar values but high content interests. The latter are probably able to reconcile the differences within their own system. For example, agricultural news might not be highly valued by one island editor but who still might express high interest in the content as it relates to economic development (which might be a high news value item for that editor).

Those participants who fall into the "2B" block on the second level are doubtful candidates for continued participation.

On the third level the change factors are introduced. Participants who have been filtered to this level through the "1A" blocks of the first two levels might begin to express dissatisfactions. The causes of dissatisfaction expressed at earlier levels by other participants might be found at this level.

The format of the news exchange experiment might be in need of revision and improvement. It is possible that the facilities themselves might be in need of change or enlargement: the introduction of teletype hard copy on an interactive basis; the retransmission of a condensed, edited version written in newspaper style, etc.

These would be the directions to explore if the bulk of the participants landed in blocks "2A" or "1B" at the third level.

If most of the participants landed in the "1A" block after similar filtering at the first two levels, it would be advisable to leave well enough alone. At this point revisions in either format or facilities might discourage more continued participation that it would encourage new participation.

If the greatest number of participants fell into the "2B" block at this level, an entirely new set of strategies would have to be developed, such as restructuring the entire program of system-wide news exchanges to sub-region to sub-region exchanges among island groups sharing a common cultural or political background.

Much of the first level of the paradigm has been implied

by the history of the news exchange experiment. The desire for regional news has been established, and the PEACESAT exchange format has been generally accepted as the most economical approach.

The main focus of the current working group's study is on the second level of the paradigm: surveying the variance of news values among the journalist-participants as well as their general interest levels in certain news contents.

In order to follow the underlying principles of the PEACESAT program, such a survey should be conducted through a dialogue with participating journalists rather than through a U.S. or New Zealand based study by questionnaire.

Naturally the dialogue should take place via the medium of development: a PEACESAT exchange.

A Pacific Journalists' Seminar

The working group has organized such a dialogue. In order to avoid the appearance of "cultural imperialism," the Pacific Islands News Association has been sought out and secured as a co-sponsor with the University of Hawaii.

To avoid the "information exchange vs news service competition" argument, the dialogue is being presented as a journalism seminar entitled: "News Values in the Pacific: Cross Cultural Perceptions of Professional Journalists."

The varied roles of the press in the Pacific and the perceptions of news values will be discussed in a series of three seminars (to begin April 23, 1979).

Part of the expressed purpose of the dialogues, as

noted in a circular sent to expected participants is:

> Through a better understanding of varied news values and perceived needs for news, more effective means for exchanging news might emerge as well as means to achieve a more appropriate flow of news within the Pacific and in and out of the Pacific.

A base-line for discussing that purpose will be the performance to date of the news exchange experiment, and how the traditional news flow patterns remain as "agenda setters" within island groups for news about other island groups.

Out of a dialogue on news values might come a list of potential high-interest content items. Such a list could be compared with a content analysis of previous news exchanges (currently being undertaken by a student member of the working group) to see to what degree such expressed high interest items have been included.

Format experimentation could be conducted using such a value/content index as well. Instead of the current format of one participant relaying all exchange items and then releasing the microphone for dialogue, the exchange could move from participant to participant for each content item so that journalists could relay their own item in a content area and relate it to the items contributed by other journalists in that same area.

The dialogue would be on-going with each item, rather than with each set of items in the exchange. Even if a journalist did not have an item to contribute in a particular content area, he or she could contribute a comment.

Summary

The PEACESAT project has the mechanism for the facilitation of communication within the Pacific, and has a good understanding of the island systems which comprise the participants in the news exchange experiment.

But what has been lacking in the experiment is a systematic study of the journalist-participants, the values they hold toward the news and the content areas they feel would have the highest reader or listener interest.

Through the three level paradigm, supplemented by a content analysis of past exchanges (and planned analyses of future exchanges), the PEACESAT news exchange experiment working group hopes to answer the questions of value, content and interest as a basis for designing innovations to the basic exchange format.

A primary means of investigating these questions will be a series of roundtable dialogues via PEACESAT among Pacific island journalists. It is hoped that participation in these dialogues will also encourage increased participation by the journalists in the basic news exchanges.

NOTES

1. Susan Allen, "Flow of News--A Pacific Perspective," Paper presented at East West Center Flow of News Conference, Honolulu, 1978.

2. John Bystrom, "A Satellite Communication System: Global Development and Cultural Imperialism," in New Perspectives in International Communication, East West Center, Honolulu, 1977, pp 178,212,218.

3. Jim Richstad, "PEACESAT: Sharing by Satellite," in Communication in the Pacific, East West Center, Honolulu, 1976, p 77.

4. _____, "Press Conference of the Pacific," a report to Users of PEACESAT Conference, East West Center, Honolulu, 1974.

5. John Griffin, editorial, Honolulu Advertiser, May 22 1973 and conversations, 1978-9.

6. Ian Johnstone, "Experiment in News and Information Exchange by Satellite," circular 121/1/1, South Pacific Commission, May 1, 1974.

7. Jackie Bowen, "PEACESAT Regional News Exchange Project, 1974-1976," Paper presented at East West Center Flow of News Conference, Honolulu, 1978.

8. Ibid.

9. Robert Keith-Reid, conversations, 1978 and comments at East West Center Flow of News Conference, 1978.

10. Bowen, op. cit.

11. Carol Misko, Hawaii PEACESAT terminal manager, conversations, 1978-79.

12. Keith-Reid, Misko, Richstad, conversations, 1977-79.

13. Richstad, "Press Conference," op. cit.

14. Johnstone, op. cit.

15. Len G. Usher, "News Communication in the Pacific," in Communication in the Pacific, East West Center, Honolulu, 1976, p 56.

Notes (Cont'd.)

16. Bowen, op. cit.

17. Flow of News Conference, East West Center, Honolulu, 1978, especially studies by Richstad: "International Flow of News in the Pacific Islands and Selected Rim Country Newspapers."

The map on page 3 of this report was prepared by PEACESAT and reproduced from the January, 1978 issue of World Health where it was contained in an article: "PEACESAT" by John Bystrom.